The Roles and Representation of Jewish Women in Zeev Jawitz' Writings

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Abstract

This article examines the roles of Jewish women in Zeev Jawitz' Writings. His perception was influenced by both traditional and masskiliic values, but his most influential source was the Hebrew Bible. Jawitz believed that the romantic ideal of love between man and woman should form the basis for marriage, instead of a match based on social and financial interests, as was customary in traditional Jewish society and among the higher classes. In addition, he highlighted traditional egalitarian aspects of men and women in Judaism, and related to famous women in the Hebrew Bible: Miriam, Dvora, and Hannah, not as the exception but as the rule. However, he was completely committed to Halakha and objected to breaching its explicit rules. Jawitz was the first religious Zionist leader and thinker, and one of the first Orthodox scholars, to deal seriously with this issue. Although his view is not systematic – probably because of the literary form of his presentation – he influenced his religious Zionist audience by introducing new and egalitarian approaches towards Jewish women.

Introduction

Zeev Jawitz (1847-1924) was born in the shtetl of Kolno in Poland. His family moved to Warsaw in 1865. He immigrated to Eretz Israel in 1887. From 1897 Jawitz lived in various places throughout Europe: Lithuania, Germany, Belgium and England. Jawitz’ literary and communal activities were highly varied. They encompassed virtually all areas of culture and he left his stamp on them all. He realized that he was living in an age of transition from one way of life in the Diaspora to a different one in the national homeland, one that presented complex problems together with occasional opportunities. He strove to harmonize Orthodoxy with life as it was developing in the land of Israel, in part by blending it with nascent Jewish nationalism. He was active in all spheres of culture: history, language, literature, and pedagogy, all the while striving for harmonization with the Orthodox outlook. He understood that a people returning to their homeland needed a national culture, one that was both broad and deep, and that the narrow world of halakha would no longer suffice. Writing in a positive spirit rather than a subversive one, he therefore attempted to construct a traditional picture of the past, with a view to creating a new program for religious education that would meet the needs of the time without causing a rift with the past.
He also tried to advance these ideas in the political sphere through the Zionist Organization's Mizrachi party. His main work was the multi-volume *Toldot Israel (History of Israel*, published 1895-1924) which encompasses Jewish history from its beginning – the biblical Patriarchs until the end of the 19th century. His historical writing, with its emphasis on religious Jewish sources, the unity and continuity of Jewish history, and respect of Orthodox principles, creates an alternative to the historiography of the celebrated historian, Heinrich Graetz. The alternative that Zeev Jawitz tried to substitute for the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the scientific study of Judaism associated with Graetz and others, was influenced not only by Orthodox ideology, which he supported, but also by his nationalist ideology.

One of the issues that concerned Jawitz, though not systematically, was the Jewish woman and her role in modern society. At the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, the process of change in western society's attitude toward women was well underway. Their legal status had improved somewhat. Women became more prominent in the public realm and schools for girls were becoming a common sight in Europe. Jewish society in Central and Western Europe, to some extent including Orthodox society, took several steps in that direction as well. In Frankfurt, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch founded a modern school for girls next to the boys' school, and his daughter Sarah Guggenheim became a respected Orthodox writer. Hirsch himself believed that although women are created in the image of God and have the same intellectual and spiritual skills as men, they have separate missions. Similar to the bourgeois German values, Hirsch also assumed that women's mission is domestic, but he focused on the education of children. He also believed the teaching methods should be different. While Jewish men should study thoroughly analytically, Jewish women should study informatively.

Among Eastern European Orthodoxy, the attitude towards women and their status remained as before, although individual voices were heard calling for a change in attitude. One such was Moshe Zalman Aharonson (1848-1908) of Kovno, the
translator of S. R. Hirsch's writings into Hebrew, who suggested establishing a school for girls in Russia, according to the model of the Orthodox school in Frankfurt. In pre-state Israel, too, in the "Old Yishuv" community, the attitude towards women and their status remained as before and there, too, came an opportunity for change, brought about by Annie Yehudit Landau, who was born in London and graduated from the girls' school established by Rabbi Hirsch in Frankfurt am Main. She headed the Evelina de Rothschild School for girls in Jerusalem at the end of the 19th century, following in the spirit of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's ideology. In the "New Yishuv" community during the first Aliya, girls attended new schools and the roles of women became more varied, in part due to the Baron's policy of sending young women to study in Paris. More and more women engaged in literary writing, teaching in schools and kindergartens, and even serving as school administrators. The systematic education for women in the new settlements was a key for future change. Part of the change was credited to the Haskalah (enlightenment) movement. One of the items on the Eastern European Maskil's agenda was the attitude towards women. The Masklim openly called for respect for women and for better education for them, and even initiated schools for girls. They promoted the ideals of friendship and affection between husband and wife, rather than the traditional "forced" matchmaking. A man marries a woman, Moshe Leib Lilinbloom wrote, so that he'll have a life-long friend: "who will live in partnership with him, share his life, his goals, his ideas and his feelings." (Chatat Neurim, 2, 370-373). At the same time, they barred women from taking an active role in maskil activities, and were concerned about the assimilation rate among women, which intensified during the final third of the 19th century. While Jewish women in Western European society functioned both as the pillar of the house in the private domain and the glue that safeguarded Jewish identity and handed tradition down to the next generation – in Eastern Europe the situation of women who underwent a process of secularization was different. Jewish women took active roles in providing for their families, and took a stand on various issues in the public domain. They received minimal Jewish education, and were therefore easily affected by the secular trends they were exposed to. This led to a loss
of Jewish identity and placed them at the forefront of assimilation. They were financially independent, refused to enter into arranged marriages, and would not permit their parents to marry them off at a young age.⁸

**The Significance of Love in the Relationship Between Man and Woman**

Jawitz was aware of women's role in the secularization process of Czarist Russia, as expressed in his letter to his fiancé Golda Piness from the summer 1870, in which he juxtaposes between her and her secular friends:

I'm glad you liked the small book I sent you, and if you'll read the article "A few things about the girls of Israel," you'll see that if the author knew you – she would have made you her poster-girl for our nation's girls, as your sole interest is the Jews' holy realm and their prized possessions of old. Your goal is to establish a home based on the fear of God and the love of Israel, and none are equal to you. If God would only grant our nation’s girls a pure heart and a language like yours, Israel's hope would stand proud, with Hebrew women who would not turn their husbands and sons away from God.⁹

The book Jawitz has sent to Golda is Fanny Neuda's book,¹⁰ *Stunden der Andacht: ein Gebet- und Erbauungsbuch fuer Israels Frauen und Maedchen zur oeffentlic* (Hours of Devotion: Book of Prayer and Devotion for Israel’s Maids for Public and House Devotions), that includes dozens of women's prayers and devotions for all times and events in the annual cycle and throughout life. The book was published in eight editions until 1870. At the end of the book one finds: "A Word to the Noble Mothers and Women of Israel."¹¹ Neuda portrays the Jewish woman as a wife and mother, responsible for the education of the next generations. She calls for the establishment of high-level female education – especially religious education and the study of the Hebrew language, thus enabling them to best fulfill their educational task with a breadth of knowledge, good character traits and Jewish pride.

He was influenced by the intellectual discourse on women. This was expressed in several ways. First of all, he too believed that the romantic ideal of love between man and woman should form the basis for marriage, instead of a match based on social and financial interests, as was customary in traditional Jewish society and among the higher classes. From letters written to his fiancé, Golda Piness, whom he referred to as “my friend,” it appears that from the very beginning their relationship was based on familiarity and mutual love.
Jawitz and Golda were relatives who met from time to time at family celebrations. In his first letter to her after their betrothal he described the development of his feelings towards her:

Two years ago, when you spent ten days with us, you caught me unaware with your beautiful eyes. You captured my heart with the charm of your words and your pleasant ways. I was embarrassed and saddened when you left us, because the feelings in my heart at that time seemed to be a mystery that nobody could solve for me. But God has solutions! Who would have believed the beauty and integrity I saw in you, whom my soul loves? Like the appearance of the dawn, like the sun in its glory, God has smiled on our counsel. And now you must know, delicate one, that my love is not new. It was not born yesterday; it has merely shaken itself awake after a short sleep. I hope it will not disappear or slumber again, because it has emerged from the mist and stands before us in all its glory, may it please the Almighty.12

On her part Golda, too, expressed her love for him in her letters, revealing that she had loved him before their engagement. “From day to day the knowledge grows within me that I love you. From day to day I realize that my soul follows you without knowing why.”13

The subject of romantic courtship and marrying for love appears in many of Jawitz’ writings throughout the years. In one anthology that he edited while in Jerusalem at the beginning of the 1890s, Jawitz published a story by Berthold Auerbach on the subject of Moses Mendelssohn’s engagement to Fromet Guggenheim, translated by Jawetz’ son Yehuda Leib.14 Mendelssohn himself portrayed his engagement to Fromet as a love story and a romantic courtship.15 In Auerbach’s story he described Mendelssohn’s various attempts to convince Fromet to marry him and how she ultimately became reconciled to the idea, despite the fact that she was originally repelled by his hunchbacked appearance.

In the second half of his historiographical work Toldot Yisrael, published in 1897, Jawitz describes Jewish society in the time of King David as an exemplary moral society. He refers to the institution of marriage as being based on love. The marriage proposal is initiated by the groom, not by his parents, and the response comes from the bride rather than her parents:

If a maiden finds favor in the eyes of a young man and he desires to take her as his wife, he tells his parents and they approach the father of the maiden to discuss with him the matter of giving his daughter to their son. If he is an important man, or if there is no father, he sends those dearest to him to approach the maiden, and after that he comes to her house and speaks to her. If the maiden agrees to be his he betroths her with the gift that he gives her.16
In his story *Tu B’Av (the Fifteenth of Av) in Eretz Israel*, published in 1903 in the *Achiassaf* Almanac, Jawitz expresses his opinion on the matter. The story combines both the traditional and the modern through the emerging style of Eretz Israel, heavily influenced by the Book of Ruth. The tale of Yosef ben Shaul Yitzhar, the “commander of the army of harvesters” from Rehovot and Hannah, an orphan who is visiting relatives in Rishon LeZion, develops along these two parallel tracks. In the traditional vein, the match is made between Yosef’s parents and Hannah’s relatives, while in the modern manner, romance blooms between them, with Yosef declaring his love to her: “And now … may we share the same fate for all the days of our lives. Although I choose to conquer my feelings within me, my heart desires to express this one thing, that our souls were formed by the Creator as woman and her mate.”

The story takes place on Tu B’Av, the harvest festival in Rishon LeZion, to indicate that direct acquaintance between men and women does not conflict with the old ways, since in ancient times in Eretz Israel the first stage in a relationship was when a maiden caught the eye of a young man. This concept of romantic courtship as the bedrock of marriage already existed in the new Yishuv during the First Aliyah period, but not only did Jawitz reflect it in his writings, he also shaped it according to his worldview.

In his stories, Jawitz used the term *Ish* – man, which represents partnership, and not *Ba’al* – husband, which connotes ownership. In addition, following his belief in relationships based on love, he opposed marriage founded on social or economic interests, and believed such relationships might lead to the failure of the couple's loyalty to one another.

In the Tu B’Av story, the mother of Yosef Yitzhar, the wealthy hero, declares that her son does not desire a wealthy bride, “saying that the crude business of money is an irritating restriction that can ruin the purity of the covenant between lovers.”

Whereas Yosef himself tells Hannah, his beloved, “I do not regard your small portion as a shortcoming, but rather as an advantage.”

Theodore Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland* (1902) encouraged Jawitz to portray the anticipated Jewish entity, which was being formed in the Land of Israel. In his
unpublished version of utopia – *Chadash Maleh Yashan (New Filled with Old)*, which was found in the National Library archive, he suggests an alternative vision that differs from Herzl's in two ways: his inspiration clearly comes from Jewish traditional biblical and Talmudic sources, and the nature of the new entity is communal. Jawitz' utopia is in fact a messianic vision of Jewish eschatology. It combines prophecies with the ideas of our Sages and describes a completely new human existence: a world free of competition and jealousy, fraud and lust, hostility and wars – a world free of the curse of Adam, of toil and labor – indeed a world of peace and truth, justice and equality, developed spiritually through the worship of the Divine. In this utopia Jawitz highlighted one of the outcomes of the new society - the end to utilitarian marriages such as that between Levenberg's lover Ernstina and the rich fabric manufacturer Weinberger in *Altneuland*. He envisioned love marriages becoming the norm:

Thus a woman would no longer rush to be sheltered by a man whom she does not desire just so that he would save her from shame and prevent her from starving. Ultimately, forced marriages for the sake of wealth would cease entirely and all marriages would be made from free will. Therefore there would no longer be any place for that which is offensive.  

In addition to his internalization of *masskilic* values on marriage, Jawitz was an agitator who sought to impart these values to his readers.

**The Status of Women in Judaism**

A further issue that disturbed Jawitz was the legal status of women in Judaism. Jewish tradition released women from many religious duties (time-related commandments), including the central religious obligation of Torah study, reduced their economic rights in comparison to men (e.g. inheritance rights), and also distanced them from any public position of community leadership, the judicial system and the rabbinate. This situation was not unheard of in Christian Europe in the medieval and early modern periods. In the 19th century this reality began to change in Europe, and in Jewish society new ideas began to be voiced.

The question of the legal status of women in Judaism reached its peak at the beginning of the British mandate in the land of Israel, regarding the question of women's suffrage in national institutions. As a result of widespread mobilization in warring countries during the First World War, women began to take the place of men
on the home front, and therefore they were frequently required to fill roles to which they were hitherto unaccustomed. This new reality heightened the demand for equal rights for women. In response, after the war, the world powers granted women the right to vote in Russia, Britain, Germany, and the United States. At the same time an intense debate was raging in the land of Israel regarding the right of women to vote in elections for Yishuv institutions. The laborers and civilian factions were in favor of granting rights to women. However, the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi members of the old Yishuv were opposed on the grounds that it went against the essential role of women, since “all the glory of the king’s daughter is within,” a reference to her modesty and the private confines of her family. The attitude of the Mizrahi faction was inconsistent because they tried to mediate between both sides in order to avoid weakening of the Yishuv. Many rabbis, too, came out against granting voting rights to women.22

Rabbi Chaim Hirschensohn (1857-1935) of New Jersey23 maintained that halakha does not discriminate against women. In principle, the status of women is equal to that of men. He explained that halakhot that actively discriminate against women are the result of how the Torah related to social and ethical realities in ancient times. The Torah does not come to change this social reality but to guide towards just and righteous conduct. That being said, social and ethical conditions in ancient times cannot serve as the yardstick of halakha, “for we do not learn halakha from ancient situations.”24 This interpretation accords with his tendency to seek the historical and cultural contexts underlying the mitzvot and halakhot in order to thoroughly understand them and consequently deduce how to adapt them to modern day reality. Thus, for example, he explains the mitzvah of selling one’s daughter into slavery. Although this practice existed in ancient times, the Torah restricted it as much as possible out of concern for the daughter’s honor. Today, however, this practice does not exist in the civilized world and therefore there is no license to observe it. Halakha promotes the development of moral and ethical humanity; it certainly does not oppose it. Therefore the rights of women in a Jewish state, including the right to vote and to be elected, must be equal to those of men. From the point of view of obligation to
specific mitzvot, Rabbi Hirschensonh explains the halakhic differences as religious differences, similar to those between a Cohen (priest), a Levite, and an Israelite. They are definitely not civil differences:

Different laws exist for women and men but it is not because in principle they are of lower status and have no rights. The differences are theological and religious, in the same way that there is a difference between an Israelite, a Cohen and a Levite. The tribes of Israel are not of lesser value, nor do they have fewer rights than those of the Levites, since among our people no man is elevated above another due to his birth. Even a learned mamzer takes precedence over an uneducated Cohen. But the customs of religion, like those of the people, obligate a division of labor, some for men, some for women, some for Cohanim, some for Levites, whereas all the congregation are holy and the Almighty resides within them.25

In contrast, the chief rabbi of the Land of Israel, Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935),26 expressed a traditional halakhic position, opposing suffrage on the grounds that according to halakha women are not allowed to participate in public life:

In the Torah, in the Prophets, and in the Writings, in the halakha and the aggadah, we hear one voice – namely, that the duty of fixed public service falls upon men, for "It is man's manner to dominate and not woman's manner to dominate" (BT Yevamot 65b). Roles of authority, judgment, and testimony are not for her, as all her glory is within. Striving to prevent the mixing of the sexes in public gatherings is a theme that runs through the entire Torah.27

Even earlier, in 1903, the question had been raised as to whether women could participate in the first conference of the Histadrut HaEretz Yisraelit, held in Zikhron Yaakov. Here too, both positive and negative voices were heard. But contrary to the later discussion, the majority decided against the inclusion of women in the Histadrut. Some of those who in principle supported the women ultimately voted against them in order to preserve the unity of the Yishuv.28

Although Jawitz did not express his position on the issue of women’s suffrage, an indication of his position on the status of women in Judaism is obtained from several of his works. He did not write a cohesive essay on this topic, but expressed his opinion in several literary genres. He was aware of the criticism about the status of women in Judaism and attempted to present a case whereby their status was not inferior to that of men, based on biblical and halakhic interpretations.

In 1886 Jawitz published his first novel Baderech Betzeiti (As I Was Leaving) in the periodical Knesset Yisrael. This early story bears some of the characteristics of Jawitz’ later Israeli style: the heroes have biblical Hebrew names: Amitai, Amnon, Amihud; and he favorably regards the simple and healthy life of the village. Written
in the first person, it tells the story of Benjamin, a young man who is going to of his uncle’s home in Eretz Israel. On the way, he encounters various people with whom he falls into conversation. Among them are his old friend Kheldi,\textsuperscript{29} a wild and undisciplined Jew, a boorish anti-Semitic Christian, and a philo-Semitic doctor, to whom he describes the status of women in Judaism.

He does so in answer to the doctor’s question about Judaism’s attitude towards women. The decision to put this question in the mouth of the philo-Semitic doctor indicates the importance of the question and the need to answer it seriously. In his answer he highlights traditional egalitarian aspects of men and women.

The sages of Israel determined that women were also created in the image of God, in contrast with Christian priests who determined otherwise in the Trident conference. According to the Sages, when Moses tried to convince the people of Israel to accept the yoke of Torah, he first turned to the women and spoke to them softly. Jawitz regarded this legend as an expression of the nation's spirit, which believes in egalitarian treatment and respect for women. Like S. R. Hirsch, he claimed that a man is incomplete without a woman.

In particular, he refers to the mandate given to women in some cases in the family and in court, because of \textit{hina} –[lit. grace, pleasantness] a concept he interprets as suggesting the sensitivity required towards women:

Because our forefathers were never members of salons – I said – but heads of families, practical people, they were concerned about giving the stronger sex authorization over the weaker sex, not with regard to desire but in family matters, and also in legal matters. This advantage was known as \textit{hina}, as in: grace and forgiveness (\textit{hina}) to the weaker sex. There it expresses the feelings of the heart more than the French expression Politesse, which has no place in the heart, being composed entirely of coating and plaster.\textsuperscript{30}

The source of the \textit{halakhic} principle of \textit{hina} is in the Babylonian Talmud (Nashim, Ketuvot 84a), where according to one opinion the \textit{ketubah} payments take precedence over others (inheritors and creditors) in debt or deposit collection because of the \textit{hina} of women. Rashi explains \textit{hina} as a specific reason in \textit{ketubah} laws that motivate women to get married, while Jawitz explains this term as a general \textit{halakhic} policy of paying attention to women in all laws relating to them.
In the first volume of *Toldot Israel* Jawitz clarified that polygamy is alien to the spirit of Judaism. He wrote that in biblical times Israelites married more than one woman as the result of external influences, and that the decree of Rabbenu Gershom Meor haGolah is the true Jewish custom, according to the spirit of Israel.\(^{31}\)

In this volume, he relates to famous women in the Hebrew Bible: Miriam, Dvora and Hannah, not as the exception but as the rule. Miriam is a prophet just like her brother Aron. Dvora is a leader just like Barak ben Avinoam. And Hannah is the mother of prophecy and the author of the first prayer of Israel.\(^{32}\)

Furthermore, in the second volume of *Toldot Israel*, Jawitz wrote about the central role played by women in Judaism and in Jewish families in ancient times. This was a direct confrontation with chauvinistic attitudes that regarded the value of women chiefly in relation to their beauty and their ability to give birth to males. Jawitz wrote of women’s dominance within the family:

> A good woman is precious in the eyes of a Jewish man. She is an adornment to him. He regards her as a gift from God; she is a treasure beyond jewels. […] Nevertheless the value of a Jewish woman goes beyond beauty alone for her praise and glory. Even sons who were greatly esteemed in the eyes of our forefathers throughout the generations are not superior to women. She is greatly praised: a woman of valor, god-fearing and wise. She oversees the activities of her household and works diligently to safeguard and increase the property of the home, acting wisely and well. She is the sanctuary and help of her husband, and recompenses him with goodness. She speaks pleasantly and kindly. She attends to the finances of her house with valor and glory. She captures the heart of her husband and children with her grace and wisdom so that they love and honor her. […]

His books contain instances in which the woman was the active partner, and her husband was content to follow her counsel:

> Some women name their sons when they are born, and some decide their sons’ path in life. Jewish women teach their sons to fear God and love kindness and honesty. The teachings of the mother can accompany the ethics of the father so that together they form the foundations of children’s morality when they become adults. Therefore the soul of the Jewish son is greatly bound up with that of his mother. It is a source of compassion and comfort all the days of her life and the source of grief and longing after her death.\(^{33}\)

His description of the Jewish woman, which was influenced by the hymn *Eshet Hayil* (Proverbs 31) – a Woman of Valor – awards women more than domestic space and grants her responsibility over an array of activities, while it remains silent about her role in the public domain. Although the woman is very active, she is still characterized as *ezar kenegdo* (his helpmate). Jawitz regarded the status of Jewish women in times of national revival in a similar manner. In his story *Rosh Ha-Shanah*
In an article written in the 1890s, he complained about the custom of sending young Jewish women to study in Paris, whence they returned to take up positions as principals in local schools: “Do we really need these girls corrupting their colleagues with Parisian dresses, dance, bowing and theatre? Does our poor nation really need this fanciness which eats away at our communities like rot?” In his opinion, Jewish girls should be educated to be caring mothers and loyal wives who assist their husbands in the vegetable garden and the cowshed.

In another article from the 1890s, he advised women to work not only with livestock and in vegetable gardens near their homes, but also in the fields – thus contributing to the growth of the Yishuv while being satisfied with their labor. It should be borne in mind that in those years it was unusual for women to participate in agricultural labor. Modest dress and politeness were very important to him. However, he believed that head covering for a woman is a non-obligatory custom and not halakhic. His wife Golda did not cover her head while they lived in Warsaw and Jawitz himself told his nieces that they do not have to cover their heads, contrary to the opinion of their father, Yechiel Michal Pines.

In the second volume of Toldot Israel, when writing about the material culture of the Jewish people in biblical times, he referred, among other things, to women’s hairstyles, citing the verses from the Song of Songs, without any mention of the obligation or custom for women to cover their heads.

On the other hand, he agreed with the separation between boys and girls in school and objected to women educating boys.

In June 1890, Jawitz went to Jerusalem on a short vacation, in order to welcome a Hovevei Zion delegation from Russia headed by rabbi Samuel Mohilever, which came to the city to celebrate Shavuot. Upon returning to Zikhron Yaakov, Jawitz learned that Mathilda Kaufman, a member of the settlement who had been sent to Paris for professional development, had replaced him on her return.
representative of the settlements on behalf of Baron Edmond Benjamin James de Rothschild, informed him that this was the decision of Baron Rothschild and his aides, because he had been criticized for his teaching of Jewish history and law. In a letter to a friend, Jawitz alluded to a romantic affair between Scheid and Kaufman, a theory strengthened by the memoirs of Dr. Hillel Yaffe and the articles of Aryeh Leib Frumkin in the contemporary press.41

Despite the personal insult he suffered at the hands of Scheid, coming after Scheid’s continuous maltreatment, in his letter of protest to Baron Rothschild Jawitz chose to focus on the *halakhic* problem raised by Scheid’s conduct rather than his generally scandalous behavior.

The confrontation focused on the question of whether according to Judaism a woman can head a Jewish school for boys. In the letter, he expressed his objections to Miss Kaufman's appointment, referring to *halakha* laid down by Maimonides:

Dear Sir,
I have taken the liberty of humbly writing to your Excellency on several occasions. On this occasion too, I ask that you not think badly of an elderly man who as rabbi, instructor, and school principal, is responsible for the moral wellbeing of the local community. I come before you, exalted sir, with a request.

For more than a year and a half I have had the honor of working in your service as the one responsible for religious awareness, and I have fulfilled my duties faithfully and seriously. But suddenly the position of principal has been taken from me. Mr. Scheid gave me free time for a short trip and during my absence I, an old man rooted in the study of Judaism, as well as the teachers and all the students in the school, were placed under the management of one Miss Kaufman. Exalted sir, please understand that this does not accord with the religious gravity of the land of our forefathers which we are obligated to nurture. This violates the customs of the people among whom we live. It violates the Jewish ethics taught in the school. (Babylonian Talmud, Kidushin, 81a; Maimonides, Hilkhot Talmud Torah, 2, 4; *Shulkhan Arukh, Eben HaEzer*, 22, 20).

The principle of the religion of our forefathers is supremely holy in the home and the school. Where will this principle be found if not in the land of our fathers? It is the pillar of light that your holy endeavors illuminate to emphasize Judaism, particularly in Eretz Israel. It is my humble request that you distinguish between the male and the female element. Boys should study under male management, and girls under female guidance. The administration must be handed over to a man.42

His reason for objecting to a woman’s management of a school with male teachers and students was *halakhic*. It was based on *dinei yichud* [the laws of seclusion between a man and a woman] and had nothing to do with the perception that a woman would be unable to fulfill this role. One should remember that in the Jewish world of
The perception of the role of the Jewish women in Jawitz' writings was influenced by both traditional and masskilig values, but his most influential source was the Hebrew Bible. This perception was influenced by two biblical definitions: "male and female has He created them" – that is, the woman was created in the image of God just like the man, and "Helpmate for him" – the woman's role in helping her husband. Between these two definitions, there was ample space for him to clarify the role of Jewish women in general, and during the national revival in particular. The possibility of a woman living alone as an ideal does not exist, just as it does not for a man. Only marriage creates a complete entity. The woman is not a tool in the hands of her husband, she is his partner and friend, and their relationship should be based on love. The husband is not necessarily the final arbiter in all matters, and a model of marriage in which the woman plays a dominant and decisive role is certainly legitimate. This portrait is anchored in the Hebrew Bible, as Jawitz often noted in his writings.

Jawitz' commitment to halakha was absolute, but as part of his interpretation he adopts conclusions that, in his opinion, give women the maximum possible equality. The issue of the role of women in the public sphere had not been addressed in his time, either because at the end of the 19th century there was still no need to do so, or because his apologetic tone conceals something he was not comfortable with. However, his opposition to a woman serving as the head of a boys’ school clearly stemmed from a well-known halakha in Maimonides and the Shulkhan Arukh, with whose modesty requirements he identified.

Jawitz was the first religious Zionist leader and thinker, and one of the first Orthodox scholars, to deal seriously with this issue. Although his view is not systematic – probably because of the literary form of his presentation – he influenced his religious Zionist audience by introducing new and egalitarian approaches towards Jewish women.
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In her article written in 1894 in defense of Zeev Jawitz, Devora Ginzburg extolled his literary influence on women: “Does anyone know who Jawitz is? He is the creator of elegant expressions. He has given us a generation familiar with the language of the past and the history of its people. His books have inspired us with the fiery sparks of the holy tongue and with love and respect for all the holy ones of our people. Wherever his books are to be found, they have moved Jewish girls to learn our holy language.” Ginzburg did not mention whether Jawitz paid particular attention to Jewish women in his writings, but this article will address this topic.


For more on Jawitz, see: Asaf Yedidya, 'To Cultivate a Hebrew Culture': The Life and Thought of Zeev Jawitz, The Bialik Institute, Jerusalem 2016 (Hebrew).


Asaf Yedidya, ''Michtavim Al Sa' Ha'Ahavah'', Segula 44 (December 2013), p. 34.


Letter from Zeev Jawitz to Golda Pines, undated, NLI Archives, Jawitz Collection, ARC 4º 1602.

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28 Shilo, The Challenge of Gender, pp. 52-64.

29 The name Kheldi recurs several times in Jawitz's stories, hinting that his hero is a man of the world, from the word kheled, "of the universe."

30 Zeev Jawitz, "Baderech Betzeiti (As I Was Leaving)," Knesset Yisrael, I (1886), p. 668.

31 Jawitz, Toldot Israel, vol. 1, p. 149-150.


34 Zeev Jawitz, Rosh Ha-Shanah La-Ilanot, Warsaw 1892, pp. 13-18.

35 Zeev Jawitz, "HaMoreh LiTzdakah O Shney HaMeorot," MiYerushalayim, 1 (1892), p. 5.

36 Idem, "Ha'aretz UTZ\'e\'etzaeiah," MiZion, 1 (Warsaw 1891), p. 16.

37 Shilo, The Challenge of Gender, pp. 37-44.


39 Zeev Jawitz, Toldot Israel, vol. 2, pp. 43-44.

40 E. R. Malachi, View the Land from Distance: Selected Articles on Eretz-Israel, Jerusalem 2001 (Hebrew), pp. 263-267.


42 Letter of Zeev Jawitz to Edmond Rothschild, 24 Sivan 1890, NYPL Archives, Jawitz Collection, 194.

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